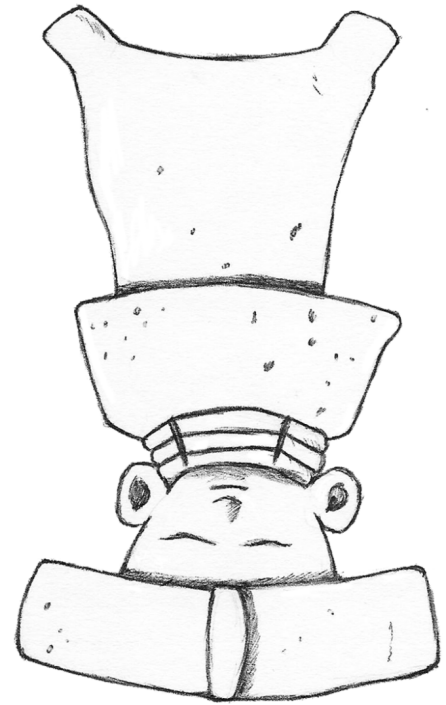


Figure 1. A collection of Mesoamerican figurines on display in the Racine Murphy Museum of Art Mesoamerican collection, ranging from 3000 BCE to 500 CE: Aztec, Colima, Chupicuaro, Jalisco, Las Charcas, Maya, Mezcala, Michoacan, Otomi, Remojadas, Teotihuacan, Tlalteco, Tlatlaco, and Zacateco © 2026 Lewis Book

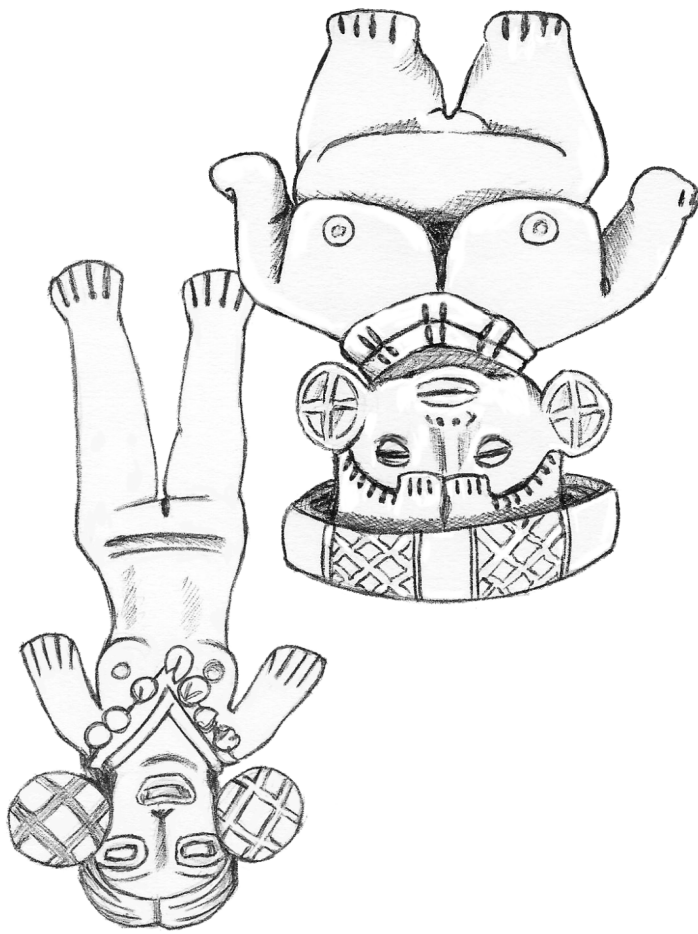


imposing auntie commands attention. The cheerful cousin you are happy to see. That guy down the street that knows everything, kind of smug but usually right. A proud athlete has his sports gear and holds a ball, ready to play. The easygoing brother. We have whole families and communities handed down to us from the hands of the original artists across thousands of years from multiple cultures. Look at global funeral practices and one thing humans agree on strongly is our urge to hold onto something of those that have left us, how precious it feels to have a reminder for the living to keep. Western European descent academics are from a history where religion and rulers are elevated as being important, leans into assumptions common people from other cultures were poor and beneath being memorialized. Academics who decide these figurines reflect mysticism more than ordinary people are filling in the blanks from Medieval peasants being erased as individuals more than what is in front of them. Talk to the collection for an afternoon, and the figurines tell you they were each someone their family and friends had loved.



## An Ancient Portrait Gallery





What names and stories would you give to each figurine yourself?



Dr. Edward Wadie Said [1935-2003] founded Post-colonial Studies to show us how the violence and domination of prior centuries was deep reaching and pervasive, echoing through systems, ideology, attitudes, and education today. It is normal for progressive art historians to be well-versed in Post-colonial Studies along with other branches of Deconstruction Theory and Intersectional Studies, yet the slant to treat non-European cultures as "primitive" and inferior persists.

Mesoamerican figurative art installed in museums around the world is fetishized as being magic effigies, religious or cult icons. Many figurines in museums are labeled as spirits or deities, categorized as superstitious. Lacking any text for identifiable mythologies and divorced from any oral histories, these designations of being other-worldly representations are contemporary. No one ever points out each figurine is highly individual. The amount of care for making each small statue unique is very intentional.

I offer a different theory of this ancient art: they are portraits.

We are looking at an ancient photo album. I will not speculate on "ancestor worship" as an expression of "primitive culture" often used to be Othering and denigrating. We keep photographs and mementos of our family members going back as far as possible. These ancient people were no less human than ourselves. We are seeing all the family and friends of people that could commission a figurine to keep and maybe pass on to descendants. Made of fired ceramic and stone, the portraits were made to survive handling, climate and weather. The personalities of each portrait shine through expression, posture, garments, jewelry, even props. Some figurines are steeped in dignity, others feel more unserious. Maybe we see little nicknames and inside jokes. Beyond some shortcuts like mitten hands and slipper feet, each figurine has an essential something of its person's character; we can see personality traits and unique features. We have the married couple that are glued to each other, kept together forever. The